The
Reawakening

PRIMO LEVI

Translated from the Italian by
STUART WOOLF

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2. The Main Camp

At Buna we did not know much of 'the main camp', of Auschwitz proper: the Häflinge transferred from one camp to another were few, hardly talkative (no Häfling ever was), and not easily believed.

When Yankel's cart crossed the famous threshold, we were amazed. Buna-Monowitz, with its twelve thousand inhabitants, was a village in comparison: what we were entering now was a boundless metropolis. There were no one-storey 'Blocks', but innumerable gloomy, square, grey stone edifices, three floors high, all identical; between them ran paved roads, straight and at right angles, as far as the eye could see. Everything was deserted, silent, flattened by the heavy sky, full of mud and rain and abandonment.

Here too, as at every turn of our long itinerary, we were surprised to be greeted with a bath, when we had need of so many other things. But this was no bath of humiliation, no grotesque-devilish-sacral bath, no black-mass bath like the first one which had marked our descent into the concentration-camp universe, nor was it a functional, antiseptic, highly automatized bath, like that of our passage into American hands many months later: it was a bath in the Russian manner, to human measure, extemporaneous and crude.

I am not questioning that a bath was opportune for us in our condition: in fact it was necessary, and not unwelcome. But in that bath, and at each of those three memorable christenings, it was easy to perceive behind the concrete and literal aspect a great symbolic shadow, the unconscious desire of the new authorities, who absorbed us in turn within their own sphere, to strip us of the vestiges of our former life, to make of us new men consistent with their own models, to impose their brand upon us.

The robust arms of two Soviet nurses lifted us down from the cart: 'Po malu!' ('gently, gently!'); these were the first Russian words I heard. They were two energetic and experienced girls. They led us to one of the installations of the Lager, which had been summarily restored, undressed us, made us lie down on the wooden laths that covered the floor, and with tender hands, but without too much regard, soaped, rubbed, massaged and dried us from head to foot.

The operation went smoothly and quickly for all of us, except for some moralistic-jacobian protests from Arthur, who proclaimed himself libre citoyen, and in whose subconscious the contact of those feminine hands upon his bare skin conflicted with ancestral taboos. But a serious obstacle intervened when it came to the turn of the last of our group.

None of us knew who he was, because he was in no condition to speak. He was a shadow, a bald little figure, twisted like a root, skeleton-like, knotted up by a horrible contraction of all his muscles; they had lifted him out of the cart bodily, like an inanimate block, and now he lay on the ground on his side, curled up and stiff, in a desperate position of defence, with his knees pressed up against his forehead, his elbows squeezed against his sides, and his hands like wedges, with the fingers pressing against his shoulders. The Russian sisters, perplexed, sought in vain to stretch him on his back, at which he let out shrill mouse-like squeaks: it was in any case a useless effort; his limbs yielded elastically under pressure, but as soon as they were released, they shot back to their initial position. Then the nurses came to a decision and carried him under the shower as he was; and because they had definite orders, they washed him as best they could, forcing the sponge and soap into the entangled knots of his body; finally, they rinsed him conscientiously, throwing a couple of buckets of tepid water over him.

Charles and I, naked and steaming, watched the scene with compassion and horror. When one of the arms was stretched out, we saw the tattooed number for a moment: he was a 200,000, one from the Vosges: 'Bon dieu, c'est un français!' exclaimed Charles, and turned in silence towards the wall.

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We were given a shirt and pants, and led to the Russian barber, so that our heads might be shaved for the last time in our careers. The barber was a dark-skinned giant, with wild and delirious eyes: he practised his art with uncouth violence, and for reasons unknown to me carried a sten-gun slung on his shoulder. 'Italiano Mussolini,' he said to me grimly; and to the Frenchmen 'Fransé Laval'; from which one sees how little general ideas help the understanding of individual cases.

Here we split up: Charles and Arthur, cured and relatively healthy, rejoined the French group and disappeared from my horizon. I, being ill, was taken to the infirmary, given a summary medical check and urgently relegated to a new 'Infectious Ward'.

The infirmary was such both by design, and also because it was indeed overflowing with invalids (in fact the Germans in flight had left only the most seriously ill at Monowitz, Auschwitz, and Birkenau, and these had all been collected together by the Russians in the Main Camp); it was not, nor could it be, a place for treatment, because the doctors (mostly ill themselves) numbered only a few dozen, drugs and sanitary equipment were wholly lacking, while at least three-quarters of the five thousand camp-inmates were in need of treatment.

The place to which I was consigned was a huge and gloomy dormitory, filled to the ceiling with suffering and moaning. For perhaps eight hundred patients there was only one doctor on duty and no nurse: the patients had themselves to provide for their most urgent needs, and for those of their sick companions. I spent only one night there, which I still remember as a nightmare; in the morning the corpses in the bunks or sprawling on the floor could be counted by the dozen.

The following day I was transferred to a smaller ward with only twenty bunks; I lay in one of these for three or four days, prostrated by a high fever, conscious only intermittently, incapable of eating, and tormented by thirst.

On the fifth day the fever had disappeared. I felt as light as a cloud, famished and frozen, but my head was clear, my eyes and ears felt as if purified by the enforced vacation, and I was able to re-establish contact with the world.

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In the course of those few days a striking change had occurred around me. It was the last great sweep of the scythe, the closing of accounts; the dying were dead, in all the others life was beginning to flow again tumultuously. Outside the windows, despite the steady snowfall, the mournful roads of the camp were no longer deserted, but teemed with a brisk, confused and noisy ferment, which seemed to be an end in itself. Cheerful or wrathful calls, shouts and songs rang out till late at night. All the same, my attention, and that of my neighbours in the near-by beds, rarely managed to escape from the obsessive presence, the mortal power of affirmation of the smallest and most harmless among us, of the most innocent, of a child, of Hurbinek.

Hurbinek was a nobody, a child of death, a child of Auschwitz. He looked about three years old, no one knew anything of him, he could not speak and he had no name; that curious name, Hurbinek, had been given to him by us, perhaps by one of the women who had interpreted with those syllables one of the inarticulate sounds that the baby let out now and again. He was paralysed from the waist down, with atrophied legs, as thin as sticks; but his eyes, lost in his triangular and wasted face, flushed terribly alive, full of demand, assertion, of the will to break loose, to shatter the tomb of his dumbness. The speech he lacked, which no one had bothered to teach him, the need of speech charged his stare with explosive urgency: it was a stare both savage and human, even mature, a judgement, which none of us could support, so heavy was it with force and anguish.

None of us, that is, except Henek; he was in the bunk next to me, a robust and hearty Hungarian boy of fifteen. Henek spent half his day beside Hurbinek's pallet. He was maternal rather than paternal; had our precarious coexistence lasted more than a month, it is extremely probable that Hurbinek would have learnt to speak from Henek; certainly better than from the Polish girls who, too tender and too vain, inebriated him with caresses and kisses, but shunned intimacy with him.

Henek, on the other hand, calm and stubborn, sat beside the little sphinx, immune to the distressing power he emanated; he brought him food to eat, adjusted his blankets, cleaned
him with skilful hands, without repugnance; and he spoke to him, in Hungarian naturally, in a slow and patient voice. After a week, Henek announced seriously, but without a shadow of selfconsciousness, that Hurbinke 'could say a word'. What word? He did not know, a difficult word, not Hungarian: something like ‘mass-klo’, ‘matisklo’. During the night we listened carefully: it was true, from Hurbinke’s corner there occasionally came a sound, a word. It was not, admittedly, always exactly the same word, but it was certainly an articulated word; or better, several slightly different articulated words, experimental variations on a theme, on a root, perhaps on a name.

Hurbinke continued in his stubborn experiments for as long as he lived. In the following days everybody listened to him in silence, anxious to understand, and among us there were speakers of all the languages of Europe; but Hurbinke’s word remained secret. No, it was certainly not a message, it was not a revelation; perhaps it was his name, if it had ever fallen to his lot to be given a name; perhaps (according to one of our hypotheses) it meant ‘to eat’, or ‘bread’; or perhaps ‘meat’ in Bohemian, as one of us who knew that language maintained.

Hurbinke, who was three years old and perhaps had been born in Auschwitz and had never seen a tree; Hurbinke, who had fought like a man, to the last breath, to gain his entry into the world of men, from which a bestial power had excluded him; Hurbinke, the nameless, whose tiny forearm – even his – bore the tattoo of Auschwitz; Hurbinke died in the first days of March 1945, free but not redeemed. Nothing remains of him: he bears witness through these words of mine.

Henek was a good companion, and a perpetual source of surprise. His name too, like that of Hurbinke, was artificial: his real name, which was König, had been changed into Henek, a Polish diminutive for Henry, by the two Polish girls who, although at least ten years older than him, felt for Henek an ambiguous sympathy which soon turned into open desire.

Henek-König, alone of our microcosm of affliction, was neither ill nor convalescent; in fact he enjoyed splendid physical and spiritual health. He was of small stature and mild aspect, but he had the muscles of an athlete; he was affectionate and obliging towards Hurbinke and us, yet harboured sedate, sanguinary instincts. The Lager, a mortal trap, a ‘bone-crusher’ for the others, had been a good school for him; in a few months it had made of him a young carnivore, alert, shrewd, ferocious and prudent.

In the long hours we passed together he told me the chief events of his short life. He was born and lived on a farm in the middle of a wood in Transylvania, near the Rumanian border. On Sundays, he and his father often went to the woods, both with guns. Why with guns? To hunt? Yes, to hunt; but also to shoot at Rumanians. And why shoot at Rumanians? Because they are Rumanians, Henek explained to me with disarming simplicity. Every now and again they also shot at us.

He had been captured and deported to Auschwitz with his whole family. The others had been killed at once; he had told the SS that he was eighteen years old and a bricklayer, when he was really only fourteen and a schoolboy. So he entered Birkenau; but at Birkenau he had insisted on his real age, had been assigned to the children’s Block, and, as he was the oldest and most robust, had become their Kapo. The children at Birkenau were like birds of passage: after a few days they were transferred to the Experiments Block, or directly to the gas chambers. Henek had understood the situation immediately, and like a good Kapo he had ‘organized’ himself, he had established solid relations with an influential Hungarian Häftling, and had remained until the liberation. When there were selections at the children’s Block he was the one who chose. Did he feel no remorse? No: why should he? Was there any other way to survive?

At the evacuation of the Lager, he had wisely decided to hide; from his hiding-place, through the small window of a cellar, he had seen the Germans empty the fabulous storehouses of Auschwitz in great haste, and he had noted that in the hurry of their departure, they had scattered a fair number of tins of food on the road. They had not stopped to recover them, but had sought to destroy them by driving their half-tracks over them. Many tins had been driven into the mud and snow with-
out splitting open; at night Henek had come out with a sack and had collected a fantastic hoard of tins, deformed, flattened, but still full: meat, lard, fish, fruit, vitamins. Naturally he had not said anything to anybody: he told me about it, because I was in the neighbouring bunk, and because I could be of use to him in guarding them. In fact, as Henek spent many hours wandering around the Lager on mysterious errands, while I was incapable of moving, my work as custodian was quite useful to him. He had faith in me; he settled the sack under my bed, and during the following days recompensed me with a fair wage in kind, authorizing me to take such extra rations as he judged proportionate to my services and suitable, in quality and quantity, to my condition as an invalid.

Hurbinek was not the only child. There were others, in relatively good health; they had formed a little ‘club’, very closed and reserved, in which the intrusion of adults was visibly unwelcome. They were wild and judicious little animals, who conversed in languages I could not understand. The most authoritative member of the clan was no more than five years old, and his name was Peter Pavel.

Peter Pavel spoke to nobody and had need of nobody. He was a beautiful blond and robust child, with an intelligent and impassive face. In the morning he climbed down from his bunk, which was on the third tier, with slow but sure movements, went to the showers to fill his bowl with water, and washed himself meticulously. Then he disappeared for the whole day, making a brief appearance only at noon to collect his soup in the same bowl. In the evening he came back for dinner, ate, went out again, re-entered soon afterwards with a chamber pot, placed it in the corner behind the stove, sat there for a few moments, left again with the pot, came back without it, climbed up quietly to his own place, punctiliously adjusted the blankets and pillow, and slept until the morning without changing position.

A few days after my arrival, I saw with discomfort a well-known face appear: the pathetic and disagreeable shape of Kleine Kiepura, the mascot of Buna-Monowitz. They all knew him at Buna; he was the youngest of the prisoners, no more than twelve years old. Everything was irregular about him, beginning with his presence in Lager, which normally children did not enter alive. No one knew how or why he had been admitted, yet at the same time everybody knew only too well. His position there was irregular, because he did not march to work, but lived in semi-isolation in the officials’ Block; moreover, his whole appearance was strikingly irregular. He had grown too much and badly; enormously long arms and legs stuck out from his squat, short body, like those of a spider; below his pale face, whose features were not lacking in infantile grace, a huge jaw jutted out, more prominent than his nose. Kleine Kiepura was the attendant and protégé of the Lager-Kapo, the Kapo of all the Kapos.

Nobody loved him, except his protector. In the shadow of authority, well fed and dressed, exempt from work, he had led until the very end the ambiguous and frivolous existence of a favourite, amid a web of denunciations and twisted affections; his name, wrongly I hope, was always whispered in the most notorious anonymous denunciations to the Political Bureau and to the SS. Hence all feared him and shrank from him.

But now the Lager-Kapo, deprived of all power, was marching towards the West, and Kleine Kiepura, recovering from a slight illness, shared our lot. He was given a bunk and a bowl, and he inserted himself into our limbo. Henek and I addressed only a few cautious words to him, hindered as we were by diffidence and hostile compassion; but he barely replied. He stayed silent for two days: he sat huddled in his bunk, staring into space with his fists tight against his chest. Then all of a sudden he began to speak – and we longed for his silence. Kleine Kiepura spoke as if in a dream: and his dream was of a success story, of becoming a Kapo. It was difficult to tell if it was madness or a puerile sinister game; endlessly, from the height of his bunk immediately below the ceiling, the boy sang and whistled the marches of Buna, the brutal rhythms that ruled our tired steps every morning and evening; he shouted imperious commands in German at a troop of non-existent slaves.

‘Get up, swine, understand? Make your beds, quickly; clean
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your shoes. All in line, lice inspection, feet inspection! Show your feet, scum! Dirty again, you shit-heap! Watch out, I'm not joking. If I catch you once more, it's the crematorium for you!' Then, yelling in the manner of German soldiers: ‘Fall in! Dressed! Covered! Collar down; in step, keep time! Hands in line with the seams of your trousers!' And then again, after a pause, in an arrogant and stridulous voice: ‘This isn't a sanatorium! This is a German Lager, its name is Auschwitz, and no one leaves except through the Chimney. If you like it, all right; if you don't, all you have to do is touch the electric wire!'  

Kleine Kiepura disappeared after a few days, to everybody's relief. His presence among us, weak and ill, but full of the timid and flickering joy of our new-found liberty, offended like that of a corpse, and the compassion he aroused in us was mixed with horror. We tried in vain to tear him from his delirium: the infection of the Lager had gained too much ground.

The two Polish girls, who carried out the duties of nurse (pretty badly), were named Hanka and Jadzia. Hanka was an ex-Kapo, as one could tell from her unshaven hair, and even more surely from her insolent manner. She could hardly have been more than twenty-four; she was of average height, with a dark complexion and hard vulgar features. In that purgatory, full of past and present sufferings, of hopes and pity, she spent her days in front of the mirror, filing her nails or strutting in front of the indifferent and ironical Henek.

She was, or considered herself, of a higher social standing than Jadzia: but it needed very little indeed to surpass in authority so humble a creature. Jadzia was a small and timid girl, of a sickly-rosy colour; but her sheath of anaemic flesh was tormented, torn apart from inside, convulsed by a continual secret tempest. She had a desire, an urge, an impelling need of a man, of any man, at once, of all men. Every male who crossed her path attracted her; attracted her materially, heavily, as a magnet attracts iron. Jadzia stared at him with bewitched and stupefied eyes, she rose from her corner, advanced towards him with the uncertain step of a somnam- 

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bulist, sought contact with him; if the man then drew away, she followed him at a distance, in silence, for a few yards, then, with her eyes lowered, returned to her inertia; if the man waited for her, Jadzia wrapped herself around him, incorporated him, took possession of him, with the blind, mute, tremulous, slow, but sure movements which amoebae show under the microscope.

Her first and principal objective was naturally Henek; but Henek did not want her, he derided and insulted her. But being the practical boy he was, he had not lost interest in the case, and had mentioned it to Noah, his great friend.

Noah did not live in our dormitory; in fact he lived nowhere and everywhere. He was a nomad, a free man, rejoicing in the air he breathed and the ground he trod upon. He was Schiessminister of free Auschwitz, Minister of latrines and cesspits; but notwithstanding this monatto-like post of his (which in any case he had assumed voluntarily) there was nothing sordid about him, or if there were anything, it was cancelled out by the impetus of his vital energy. Noah was a young Pantagruel, as strong as a horse, voracious and lecherous. As Jadzia wanted all men, so Noah wanted all women; but while the feeble Jadzia limited herself to throwing out her tenuous threads, like a rock-mollusc, Noah, a high-flying bird, cruised along all the roads of the camp from dawn to dusk, on the seat of his repugnant cart, cracking his whip and singing at the top of his voice; the cart stopped before the entrance of each Block, and while his troop, filthy and stinking, hurried, cursing, through their repulsive task, Noah wandered around the feminine dormitories like an oriental prince, dressed in an arabesque many-coloured coat, full of patches and braid. His encounters were like so many hurricanes. He was the friend of all men and the lover of all women. The deluge was over; in the black sky of Auschwitz, Noah saw the rainbow shine out, and the world was his, to repopulate.

Frau Vitta (or rather Frau Vita, as every Italian called her),* on the other hand, loved all human beings with a love both simple and fraternal. Frau Vita, with her ruined figure and

* 'Vita' in Italian means 'life'.
clear gentle face, was a young widow from Trieste, half Jewish, a survivor of Birkenau. She spent many hours beside my bed, speaking to me of a thousand things at the same time with Triestine volubility, laughing and crying. She was in good health, but deeply wounded, ulcerated, by what she had undergone and seen in a year of Lager, and during those last gruesome days. In fact, she had been ‘commandeered’ for the transport of corpses, of lumps of corpses, of wretched anonymous remains, and these final images weighed upon her like a mountain; she sought to exorcise them, to wash herself clean of them, throwing herself headlong into a tumultuous activity. She was the only person to bother about the invalids and the children; she did it with frantic compassion, and when she still had free time she washed the floors and windows with wild fury, rinsed the bowls and glasses noisily, ran around the dormitories to carry real or fictitious messages; then she came back exhausted, and sat panting on my bunk, with tearful eyes, starved of words, of intimacy, of human warmth. In the evening, when all the jobs of the day were over, incapable of enduring solitude, she suddenly jumped up from her bunk, and danced by herself between the bunks, to the sound of her own songs, affectionately clasping an imaginary man to her breast.

It was Frau Vita who closed André’s and Antoine’s eyes. They were two young peasants from the Vosges, both my companions for the ten days of the interregnum, both ill with diphtheria. I seemed to have known them for centuries. With strange parallelism, they were simultaneously struck by a form of dysentery, which soon showed itself to be extremely serious, of tubercular origin; in a few days the scales of their fate tipped down. They were in two neighbouring bunks, they did not complain, they endured the atrocious colic with clenched teeth, without understanding its mortal nature; they spoke only to each other, timidly, and they never asked anyone for help. André was the first to go, while he was speaking, in mid-sentence, as a candle goes out. For two days no one arrived to take him away; the children came to look at him with bewildered curiosity, then continued to play in their corner.

Antoine remained silent and alone, wholly shut in a suspense that transformed him. His state of nutrition was reasonable, but in two days he underwent a metamorphosis of dissolution, as if sucked up by his companion. Together with Frau Vita we managed to get a doctor, after many vain attempts; I asked him, in German, if there was anything to be done, if there was any hope, and I counselled him not to speak in French. He replied in Yiddish, with a brief phrase I did not understand; then he translated into German: ‘Sein Kamerad ruft ihn’, ‘His companion is calling him’. Antoine obeyed the call that same evening. They were not yet twenty, and they had been in the Lager only one month.

Finally Olga came, in a night full of silence, to bring me the dismal news of the Birkenau camp, and of the fate of the women deported with me. I had been waiting for her for many days; I did not know her personally, but Frau Vita, who, despite sanitary injunctions, also frequented patients in other wards in search of troubles to alleviate and of impassioned conversations, had informed us of our respective presences, and had organized the illegal meeting in the depth of the night while everyone was sleeping.

Olga was a Jewish Croat partisan, who in 1942 had fled to Piedmont with her family and had been interned there; she belonged to that flood of thousands of foreign Jews who had found hospitality, and a brief peace, in the paradoxical Italy of those years, officially anti-Semitic. She was a woman of great intelligence and culture, strong, beautiful and with insight: deported to Birkenau, she had survived there, alone of her family.

She spoke Italian perfectly; from reasons of gratitude and temperament, she had soon become a friend of the Italian women in the camp, and in particular of those who had been deported in the same train as I. She told me their story by candlelight, with her eyes fixed on the ground. The furtive light illumined only her face in the darkness, accentuating its precocious lines, and transforming it into a tragic mask. A handkerchief covered her head; she untied it at one point and the mask became as macabre as a skull. Olga’s cranium was bare, covered only with a short grey down.
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They had all died. All the children and all the old people had died immediately. Of the 550 people of whom I had lost trace when I entered the Lager, only twenty-nine women had been admitted to the Birkenau camp: of these, five alone had survived. Vanda had died by gas, fully conscious, in the month of October; Olga herself had procured two sleeping tablets for her, but they had not proved sufficient.

3. The Greek

Towards the end of February, after a month in bed, I was not yet cured, and indeed began to feel but little improvement. I had a clear impression that I would not regain my health and my strength until I stood upright again (albeit with difficulty), and put shoes on my feet. So, on one of the rare days when the doctor called, I asked him to let me out. The doctor examined me, or pretended to do so; he noted that the desquamation of the scarlet fever had finished; he told me that as far as he was concerned I could go; he warned me, absurdly, not to expose myself to fatigue or cold, and he wished me good luck.

I cut myself a pair of socks from a blanket, grabbed as many jackets and pairs of trousers as I could find (for no other clothing was to hand), said good-bye to Frau Vita and Henek and went out.

I stood on my feet somewhat shakily. Immediately outside the door, there was a Soviet officer; he photographed me and gave me five cigarettes. A little farther on, I was unable to avoid a fellow in civilian dress, who was hunting for men to clear away the snow; he captured me, deaf to my protests, gave me a spade and attached me to a squad of shovellers.

I offered him the five cigarettes but he refused them with contempt. He was an ex-Kapo, and had naturally remained in office; who else in fact could have managed to make people like us clear the snow? I tried to shovel, but it was physically impossible. If I could get round the corner, no one would see me any more, but first I had to free myself of the spade; it would have been interesting to sell it, but I did not know to whom; and to carry it with me even for a few steps was dangerous. There was not enough snow to bury it. In the end I dropped it through a cellar window, and I found myself free again.

I walked into a Block; there was a guardian, an old Hun-